Chapter 2

Ecotourism in Protected Areas: A Sustainable Development Framework

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of ecotourism in the sustainable development of protected areas. It specifically examines the aims of ecotourism in simultaneously contributing to economic development and environmental sustainability in protected areas. The chapter further analyzes protected areas within the ecological, human, and institutional dimensions, and demonstrates how the outcomes of ecotourism are linked to the economic, social, and environmental pillars that drive sustainable development. The chapter also discusses challenges surrounding the sustainability of ecotourism in protected areas and several mitigation strategies. It concludes that while ecotourism aims for economic development it can have detrimental effects on the ecological resources and host communities if not managed in a strategic sustainable way. The chapter recommends that ecotourism in protected areas should be carried out within the realm of environmental justice where all stakeholders and the natural environment are treated with respect and equity.

INTRODUCTION

Being the third export sector in the world (United Nations World Tourism Organization/UNWTO, 2018a) with a projected growth trajectory of 3.3 percent annually through to 2030 (UNWTO, 2018b), there is a continuous thrust for the sustainable development of tourism for the benefit of mankind and the environment. This is understandable as sustainable development focuses on adaptive capabilities and means of creating opportunities not only to maintain but to achieve desirable social, economic and ecological systems for present and future generations (Cobbinah, Black & Thwaites 2011; Folke, Carpenter, Elmqvist, Gunderson, Holling & Walker, 2002). Sustainable development is driven by three pillars, namely, economic, environmental and social (UNWTO, 2017). Although the concept of sustainable development is not new, greater effort is required to link the work of academia, government
and tourism businesses to have a shared pattern of reasoning and commitment regarding tourism and sustainability (Theobald, 2005).

Ecotourism is proposed as an activity that can bring the concept of sustainability into tourism through the promotion of economic and social development, without compromising the state of natural ecosystems and biodiversity (Kiper, 2013). This sustainable related activity is regarded as a conservation and development tool due to its propensity to maintain the integrity of ecological resources by way of low-impact, non-consumptive resource use and simultaneously provide local economic benefits (Stem, Lassoie, Lee & Deshler, 2003). This is supported by Meletis and Campbell (2009) who note that this form of tourism is both benevolent and benign; benevolent in terms of providing benefits and benign as it relates to reducing the negative impacts.

Ecotourism is conceptualized as responsible travel to natural areas which conserves the environment, improves the welfare of the local people and involves interpretation and education (The International Ecotourism Society / TIES, 2017). This form of tourism not only has ecological and economic impacts on host communities but also socio-cultural impacts (Ogorelc, 2009). Ecotourism is therefore positioned as an approach to foster sustainable development in protected areas and their environs (Ashok, Tewari, Behera & Majumdar, 2017) especially since the three pillars of sustainable development are environmental, economic and social. Ecotourism is also being used to increase the economic value of protected areas and create opportunities for economic development for local residents (Goodwin, 1996). A protected area as defined by Dudley (2008) is: “A clearly defined geographical space, recognized, dedicated and managed, through legal or other effective means, to achieve the long-term conservation of nature with associated ecosystem services and cultural values.” The characteristics of protected areas with their natural, historical and cultural richness make them vital for ecotourism (Cengiz, 2007).

Protected areas, including national parks and world heritage sites are prime attractions for tourists who have an interest in exploring natural areas and wildlife across the world (International Union for Conservation of Nature / IUCN, 2014). The appropriate use of protected areas requires proper planning and management (Boo, 1993). If not managed properly, tourist activities can impact the very resources on which they depend (Narayan, 1998). Charles and Wilson (2008) espoused that consideration should not only be given to the biological and oceanographic influences but also to human matters which include social, economic and institutional dimensions. For the purpose of this chapter, the biological and oceanographic influences will be categorized as ecological dimension. This is plausible as according to Sharma and Sharma (2005) ecology describes the interactions between organisms and their physical environment. The institutional dimension will be analyzed separately since it addresses the governance arrangements for the operation of a protected area as an ecotourism site (Charles & Wilson, 2008). The social and economic considerations will remain under the category of human dimension.

**BACKGROUND**

The literature shows that current studies on ecotourism in and around protected areas are limited. Some of these studies have been done over a decade ago (e.g. Brenner & Job, 2006; Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996; Farrell & Marion, 2001; Lindsey, Alexander, Mills, Romañach & Woodroffe, 2007). Since ecotourism can cause environmental ills not only to the ecology but also to surrounding communities (Steel, Clinton & Lovrich, 2003), the theory of environmental justice seems plausible in explaining the relationship between ecotourism, protected areas and local residents. This is supported by Carruthers (2008). The